



Master's Thesis

Critical approaches to the philosophies, policies and practices of international development and humanitarian aid

Almost since its beginning, the philosophy of international development cooperation, as well as the various policies and practices implemented for its realisation, have been subjected to sustained critique. Development itself has also undergone a series of transformations since the 1950s, with new approaches being introduced at least every decade. There has been an interesting sedimentation of critique and counter-critique that can be traced through the discourses and practices of different organisations, initiatives and projects. Some of the major points of critique over the years have included:

- The way development aid is being delivered and evaluated
- The efficiency, sustainability and different formats of project and program implementation
- The neo-colonialism of development aid, which supposedly makes less developed countries dependent on western countries
- The “de-politicising” effect, or a-political aspirations, of development interventions
- The instrumentalisation of ideas and practices of participation, empowerment, etc.

This MA thesis topic will engage with particular aspects of development critique by focusing on one specific sub-question. Students are welcome to propose specific topics within this frame and discuss options with the contact persons listed above. The following questions are for orientation purposes:

1. *Sifting sedimentations of critique and response*: theses within this subtopic would unpack the layers of critique and response within a particular organisation or longstanding development project on such central concepts to development as participation, social inclusion or gender. Through studying archived documents (project reports, organisational newsletters, working papers) and interviewing former and present staff (coopérants), the Masters thesis will explore how and why this topic came on the agenda for the organisation/project, what critiques were formulated (by donors, by own staff, political dynamics in the partner country, etc) and how the organisation/project sought to respond to these at the level of discourse and of practice. Through tracing a case study of a particular critique and response the thesis will contribute to our understanding of how and why development organisations learn and change in the way they speak and present themselves, and the way that they do things. Theses on this topic may require a short “fieldwork” outside of Switzerland.



2. The politics of development in political transitions:

This Masters thesis would explore how development actors address political issues in country contexts defined by transition (whether post-conflict transition, post-communist transition or other).

Particularly looking at development projects, theses in this field would explore how political dynamics are assessed and responded to formally and informally at various phases and levels, by different actors, in the project design and implementation. Through elaborating a case study of a particular development project or programme, this research would contribute to our understanding of the political challenges faced by development actors and the various “everyday” ways in which development does (and sometimes does not) manage to adapt and function in complex political environments. Theses on this topic would require a short “fieldwork” outside of Switzerland.

Note: The thesis can be written in either English or German

Contact: Sarah Byrne (sarah.byrne@geo.uzh.ch) or Pia Hollenbach (pia.hollenbach@geo.uzh.ch)